RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

Parshas Vayishlach

Unpredictable Reactions

In Parshas Vayishlach we learn about Yaakov Avinu's battle with the *Sar shel Eisav* after he crossed the river alone to retrieve his forgotten vessels. Rashi makes a puzzling remark on the Passuk "*Vayei'aveik ish imo – The angel wrestled with him*".

In defining the word *Vayei'aveik*, Rashi gives us two possible roots. The first one, is that it is derived from the word "*avak* – dust", because as they were wrestling, they kicked up the dust at their feet. The other explanation, the one preferred by Rashi, is that it is derived from the Aramaic term for "embracing". While fighters wrestle they appear to be locked in an embrace.

It is very puzzling that Rashi prefers the second explanation, after all, the first explanation makes sense. When involved in battle, it is normal for fighters to kick up sand, dust and whatever else might be in their path. But the second explanation is rather intriguing; while it's true that fighters will make physical contact and they seem to be hugging, the root word has a diametrically opposite connotation. Hugging is something that people do when they *love each other.*

The Ksav Sofer explains that as we know, this battle was representative of Klal Yisrael's eternal conflict with the nations of the world, and these explanations give us a glimpse into the nature of these conflicts. Throughout our history, the *umos ha'olam* have never been very fond of us, and have always tried to make our lives difficult. Sometimes, though, they change tactics. They pretend to embrace us, to love us, they sweet-talk us, and try to undermine us through 'love'.

We might be lulled into complacency and let our guard down, because after all, the *goyim* are being so nice! We are unaware that this is part of the battle and we can never really know when they will start kicking up the dust again.

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When dealing with their spouses or children, some people have this temperament as well. They're sometimes loving, gentle, and caring, but then - out of nowhere - they blow their fuse and go off on a mad tangent.

This type of behavior is not only confusing to family, but also damaging. Family members of such people have said to me that they wish

their spouse/parent would never be nice to them at all! Because when they are treated well, they allow themselves to believe that all will be forever good, and then the next explosion catches them completely off guard.

Of course, it's normal for someone to have a bad day or be in a bad mood, as long as you are aware of what you're doing and you don't forget to apologize if you mistreat anyone. But telling your child one day that he's a *tzaddik* and the next that he's a good-for-nothing, or being unpredictable to the point where your family never knows what's going to set you off, can be very hurtful and even abusive.

When dealing with your family members, don't be a *sar shel Eisav,* make sure to keep your messages consistent and predictable, no matter what comes your way.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My wife and I have been blessed with thirteen children ke"h and also with laid-back, easygoing personalities. We recently realized that our younger children don't sit at the Shabbos table. They sit for *kiddush* and then they're off and running. We're not the type to insist on decorum or yell at our kids, and our older kids turned out fine B"H even though we never disciplined them in this area. What can we - or should we - do to get them to participate in our Shabbos meals?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. With my response, I hope to help out others who might find themselves in a similar situation.

When we see our kids behave less than ideally, it's very easy to get carried away. "*Oh my goodness, he left his socks on the floor! He's never ever going to clean up after himself in his lifetime*!", "*Oh no! She got her outfit dirty! She'll be a messy eater forever!*" But it is not necessarily so. Very often, children who behave like children while they're young, turn into very fine and upstanding adults. Your own children are proof to this concept. Even though you never made a big deal about your family sitting nicely at the table, your

children grew older and they started doing so on their own. So there's no need to get carried away by kids being kids.

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When it comes to the perfect Shabbos *seudah*, many of us have this picturesque image in our mind. A majestically set table, beautifully dressed children all sitting serenely in their seats, the father animatedly sharing a *vort* on the Parsha while the mother calmly looks on from her seat taking in the well deserved Nachas. In this mythical scene the baby is always gurgling contentedly in the high chair, and the grape juice is always nestled securely in everybody's cup. This image is very popular, and you might each find your favorite version of it in the children's coloring book of your choice.

Not surprisingly, many parents strive for this romanticized version of a Shabbos table. They would love for theirs to look just like it. But most parents, especially those with a house full of little kids, quickly learn that this image is as far removed from reality as it gets. And that's okay.

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There is a proliferation of solutions and suggestions for people who are looking for ways to make their Shabbos seudah more kid friendly. If you would like to give that a try and you think you might enjoy doing so, go right ahead. I use many of these ideas myself, and I can tell you that many of them really are good and work. And a pleasant Shabbos Seuda really *is* rewarding and especially beneficial.

Sometimes, though, the efforts expended on creating the perfect atmosphere can become too much of a burden on the parents – especially when it doesn't magically have the desired effect. That, in turn, might lead to burnout and nervousness on the part of the parents. Conversely, children who are made to sit through an adult style meal might become stressed out and resentful.

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If it would bother you or your wife very much, then it would be more of a *chinuch* issue: out of respect for the parent/s, the kids should be behaving better. Sometimes it becomes a Shalom Bayis issue, with each parent holding on to a different opinion, and not relenting from their position and principle of how their kids should behave.

However, since for your family it is neither of those – you mentioned that you are both okay with it – then what's the problem?

It's not that children don't belong at a Shabbos table, they do! But sometimes it's enough that they sit by kiddush and then go play, visiting the meal sporadically as you carry on. As they get older, they will be compelled to sit for longer periods of time, until they are mature enough to sit through all of it. As long as it doesn't seem out of bounds, with children not participating at all, or purposely not coming to the table out of animosity or rebellious feelings cha"v, it's relatively okay, especially if you're okay with it.

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You mention that what you've done till now seemed to work, and I'd therefore assume that it's not out of bounds or wrong at all. There's nothing better than what works!

As always, there is no black and white solution. Each of your kids might have different needs, and the best thing is often to allow each of them to participate as much as they feel ready to. The idea is that nobody needs to experience any stress. Do whatever works for you and your family.

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Some parents feel a lot of pressure because they fear that if they don't model the ideal seudah, their children will grow up not knowing how to have a seudah. There's no need to panic. It's often not what you *tell* your children, but what they see you do. When a child sees his father's enthusiasm at the Shabbos table, hears his passionate singing, his sweet *dvar* Torah, it becomes ingrained in him – even if all of this is happening while he's playing with his Playmobil set on the dining room floor. When he will grow up, he will know just what he needs to do, *be'ezras Hashem.*

Moshe and Chananya davened in very different *shuls*. "How is it possible," Moshe asked Chananya, "that in our *shul* we have programs for the children and make sure they're quiet and respectful during *davening*, but when they grow up their *davening* is lukewarm at best? In your shul, the boys run around all over the place and never sit through the *davening*, yet when they get older, they really seem to be into it?"

"Well," said Chananya, "in your shul the children hear a lot about Davening. By us they *see their fathers daven,* and that is what they emulate when they grow up."

We can and should give our youth something to aspire to when they grow older, by modeling the behaviors we would like to see in them. But we have to let them behave like children. It's appropriate and it's healthy.

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Parents sometimes worry that they must do certain things a certain way, otherwise they're not getting it 'right'. For example, they think Shabbos food must be cooked fresh on Friday, or that they must have homemade *challos* every week. They believe that they have to repeat a complicated *dvar* Torah by every meal, or that they must host 25 guests every week. But it doesn't have to be one particular thing, even if your own parents did it. Find out what works for *your* family.

There are so many opportunities to celebrate our Yiddishkeit. It doesn't have to be *davka* the Shabbos *seudah* every week. It could be a nice Rosh Chodesh *seudah* once a month, or a Chanukah party, or a Purim celebration.

If having impossibly high standards or demands of yourself causes you stress, then your children will not be impressed. They will grow up resenting your efforts. Do what enables you to serve Hashem calmly while allowing you to build a happy, stress-free home for your family.

Kudos again to your excellent parenting, my blessings for continued success!

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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